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Sport and the state in Ireland: an overview

Neal Garnham

Over the last two and a half centuries the state in Ireland has enjoyed a shifting and complex relationship with popular sporting activity. It has been marked by intermittent episodes of enthusiasm for and encouragement of activity, occasional indifference, and even sporadic bouts of opposition and hostility. This paper is an attempt to outline that relationship and to offer some reasons as to why it developed in the ways it did. State attitudes to sport in Ireland tell us something of popular practices and fashions, but rather more about the preoccupations of the government and the political classes. For the most part, academic historians who have examined these relationships have concentrated their attentions on the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA), an organisation founded in 1884 to promote sports and games considered 'native' to Ireland. However this paper, while it offers only an overview of the issues, will travel beyond both the chronological and the cultural boundaries of the GAA.

The eighteenth century and beyond

From the limited evidence available, it seems that mid-eighteenth century Ireland had patterns of popular sports and leisure activities that were largely typical of the early modern world. Sports and games were locally defined in their rules, and took place regularly but infrequently. Events were usually tied to the religious calendar or the harvest year. Thus football matches were often played annually after the crops had been brought in, and Shrove Tuesday was the established day for the fighting of cocks. Though a game known as hurling was widely played, the rules of the sport varied from parish to parish and from county to county. Much activity took place under elite patronage, with landowners and local grandees offering prizes and inducements to players, and wagering on results. There was no inherent contradiction in fashionable gentlemen patronising 'orderly country sports, the fashionable diversions of the city, and the haunts of the aesthete.'¹ Such

¹ Toby Barnard, *Making the grand figure: lives and possessions in Ireland, 1641-1770* (London 2004) 226; L.P. Ó Caithnia, *Scéal na hlomana* (Dublin 1980) 15-23; Art Ó Maolfabhail, *Camán: two thousand years of hurling in Ireland* (Dundalk 1973) 23-32;

localised pastimes only became of interest to the state when they threatened disorder or impinged on the property rights of the important. For example, an attempt to stage a horse race in opposition to the wishes of a local landowner near Dublin in 1747 led to the calling out of the army to disperse the crowd, the firing of shots, and at least one death.²

However, from the late eighteenth century, these familiar patterns of activity came under assault from both the state and from wider changes in society. Traditionally, such declines in England have been attributed to five factors. First, industrialisation led to a decline in the amount of time the people could devote to play. Secondly, enclosure and urbanisation resulted in restrictions on the space available for sports. Thirdly, a shift in acceptable modes of behaviour and a wider reformation of manners led to less tolerance of actions that seemed to infringe on public decency and order. At the same time the expansion of the state in law enforcement and a greater concern with the defence of property and trade also acted to counter disruptive popular sports. Finally, it has been argued that under the influence of both the French Revolution and shifting manners, sponsoring elites largely withdrew their support for many popular events.

The alleged result of these changes was a widespread decline in popular sporting activity. Although this interpretation has been questioned and qualified by historians, much of it does seem to be applicable in Ireland.³ Undeniably, the impact of industrialisation was limited, and urbanisation occurred on only a limited scale. It is clear, though, that Ireland was subject to the influence of a reformation of manners in the later eighteenth century and beyond, with the Catholic and Protestant churches leading an assault on many popular practices that they considered disreputable.⁴ Most importantly, though, it is very apparent that the Irish elites, inspired not just by the successful revolution in France, but by the

Kevin Whelan, 'The geography of hurling', *History Ireland* I (1993) 27-31. The second item is published and written in Irish.

² *Pue's occurrences*, 4-8 Aug, 31 Oct-1 Nov, and 15-19 Dec 1747.

³ For a summary of the debates regarding the supposed decline in the British sporting culture, see: Neil Tranter, *Sport economy and society in Britain 1750-1914* (Cambridge 1998) 3-12.

⁴ Sean Connolly, 'Religion, work-discipline and economic attitudes: the case of Ireland' in: Tom Devine and David Dickson ed., *Ireland and Scotland 1600-1850: parallels and contrasts in economic and social development* (Edinburgh 1983) 235-245; 243-244.

failed one in Ireland in 1798, withdrew from many of their roles in Irish society. Where once they had acted as sponsors of sports and games, the Irish elites now withheld their support for mass gatherings that could act as pretences for seditious and revolutionary meetings.⁵

There was also some expansion of the state and a clearer will to defend property. It can be argued that from the 1790s municipal authorities, worried by potential threats to both property and the political order, sought to restrict 'the use of urban public spaces.'⁶ The decision in 1791 to enact legislation 'to prohibit horse races in the neighbourhood of the city of Dublin' had less to do with reforming manners than the fact that these events 'encouraged unlawful assemblies.'⁷ Subsequent legislation barred activities as varied as road bowling and cockfighting.⁸ It is true that these pastimes did not disappear entirely, but their being rendered illegal certainly discouraged many from taking part in them. Moreover, the growing police structure in Ireland, where law enforcement was both more intense and more advanced than in most areas of Britain, allowed such laws and new conventions to be more effectively enforced.⁹

By the early nineteenth century, the state was taking a greater role in the sports and pastimes of the people of Ireland, but this role was wholly negative. It seems fair to say that by the 1850s the 'constabulary, parish priest and landlord were moving with enhanced effectiveness against all forms of uncontrolled popular assembly and pastime.'¹⁰ Amongst these practices were the popular sports that had thrived in the eighteenth century. Through the use of the law, such traditional practices became criminalised and delegitimised. The establishment of regular policing agencies meant that such laws were more easily and readily enforced. Thus, in 1830 a group of

⁵ Sean Connolly, "'Ag Deanamh Commanding": elite responses to popular culture, 1660-1850' in: J.S. Donnelly Jr. and Kerby A. Miller ed., *Irish popular culture, 1650-1850* (Dublin 1998) 1-29; 21-22.

⁶ Martin J. Powell, *The politics of consumption in eighteenth-century Ireland* (Basingstoke 2005) 123.

⁷ 'An act to prohibit horse races in the neighbourhood of the City of Dublin' (31 GeoIII c43 (Ire) (1791)).

⁸ Neal Garnham, 'The survival of popular blood sports in Victorian Ulster' in: *Proceedings of the Royal Irish Academy*, series C, CVII (2007) 107-126; 108-112; Fintan Lane, *Long bullets: a history of road bowling in Ireland* (Ardfield, Co. Cork 2005) 21-34.

⁹ See, for example, Brian Griffin, *The Bulkies: police and crime in Belfast, 1818-1865* (Dublin 1997) 103-108.

¹⁰ R.V. Comerford, *Inventing the nation: Ireland* (London 2003) 216.

Dublin men who had been engaged in the traditional pastime of wren hunting knocked at the door of a local resident. They displayed their captive bird, sang the usual song in praise of the wren, and looked forward to the traditional donation of money to buy drink. Instead, the domestic servants felt threatened and called the police. The now unwelcome callers were arrested, and each eventually received two weeks imprisonment.¹¹

Thus, the period from the late eighteenth up to the mid-nineteenth century seems to have been one of sporting decline in Ireland. In part, this was due to a series of widespread if gradual changes in Irish economic and social circumstances. The impact of the Great Famine should also be recognised. Through death and emigration Ireland lost huge numbers of its rural poor and the indigent labouring classes. It was these individuals who were most wedded to the old ways. They would be replaced by a more prosperous, stable and respectable urban bourgeoisie and rural tenant farmer class.



Ill. 1: Dog fights, such as this American example, became the focus of state opposition in Ireland from 1837. The practice continued in secret however. Author's collection.

¹¹ *Freeman's journal*, 2 Jan 1831.

For these citizens, new, more ordered, literate and anglicised cultures would appeal more than the old ways.¹² However this apparent decline in Ireland's sporting and cultural life was at least partly due to the actions of the state, its supporters and its servants. The state was unwilling to accept practices that it saw as threatening. Large groups of young men, whether gathered in political protest or for sporting endeavours, would not be tolerated.¹³ Moreover, the organs of the state provided a means through which those who had access to them could attempt to impose their will and standards upon those below them.

Sporting renaissance

However, from around 1850, societal attitudes began to shift, and in this modernising Ireland at least some sports and games came to be encouraged rather than suppressed. Cricket, for example, was seen as almost a panacea for Ireland's ills. Its supporters claimed that it could do everything from prevent political dissent to teach courage and manners.¹⁴ Association football would be praised for the physical benefits it brought to players, as well as the game's supposed ability to bring men of 'all classes, creeds and religions together'.¹⁵ Humanists and evangelical clergymen, Catholics and Protestants, temperance campaigners and publicans, Home Rulers and Unionists, could now all agree that sport was a very good thing for the people of Ireland. In the new forms into which it was evolving, sport was physically, morally and mentally improving. Certain recreations, including

¹² On post-Famine change see: R.V. Comerford, 'Ireland 1850-70: post-Famine and mid-Victorian' in: W.E. Vaughan ed., *A new history of Ireland V: Ireland under the Union, 1801-1870* (Oxford 1989) 372-395 and K.T. Hoppen, *Elections, politics and society in Ireland 1832-1885* (Oxford 1984) 456-464. For the argument that the Famine had the effect of 'accelerating change rather than causing it' with respect to sporting activity see: Sean Connolly, 'Popular culture in pre-Famine Ireland', *Canadian journal of Irish studies* XII (2)(1986) 12-28; 26.

¹³ See: *Freeman's journal*, 6 Jan 1831, for a report of 'hurling meetings' that were in fact rallies in support of reforms of the tithing system.

¹⁴ Neal Garnham, 'The roles of cricket in Victorian and Edwardian Ireland', *Sporting traditions* XIX (2)(2003) 35-41.

¹⁵ Neal Garnham, *Association football and society in pre-partition Ireland* (Belfast 2004) 13-15.

some sports, were becoming accepted as 'rational' in that they now served a purpose, and improved those who partook of them.



Ill. 2: The Irish Rugby XV take on England in Dublin in 1899. Such sports were encouraged as improving the physical, mental and moral welfare of the population. Even the state played its part in this. *The graphic*, 11 Feb 1899.

In the background, the state eventually began to shift its attitudes and to take a series of actions that encouraged, or at least facilitated, a much wider participation in such sports and games. The passing of various Factory Acts that limited the time workers could be employed led to the emergence of regular periods of rest. These soon came to be used for sporting and leisure pursuits.¹⁶ The construction of parks at public expense allowed greater access to sport and leisure facilities. From 1869, legislation allowed local government bodies in Ireland to acquire land for leisure purposes, a prerogative that some local governments at least made good use of.¹⁷ Meanwhile, urban growth, notably in Dublin and Belfast, along with growing levels of disposable incomes, resulted in the establishment of commercialised sporting ventures by adventurous entrepreneurs. Thus, the

¹⁶ Desmond Greer and James W. Nicholson, *The Factory Acts in Ireland, 1802-1914* (Dublin 2003) 18-28, 55-59, and 71-75.

¹⁷ Robert Scott, *A breath of fresh air: the story of Belfast's parks* (Belfast 2000) 18-20.

City and Suburban Racecourse was established to serve Dublin's punters in the 1880s.¹⁸

Encouraged by changed circumstances and attitudes, the last quarter of the nineteenth century saw an explosion in sporting activity in Ireland. This is most visible through the establishment of a series of governing bodies which sought to oversee the conduct of specific sports and games across the country. Thus the Irish Rugby Football Union (IRFU) was established in 1880, the Irish Football Association (IFA) was formed in 1881, and an Irish Lacrosse Union had been founded in 1876. However, undoubtedly the most influential sporting organisation in Ireland, the Gaelic Athletic Association (GAA) was not formed until 1884. From the very beginning the GAA took on a clear Catholic ethos. The organisation was structured around the Catholic parish system, sports took place after Mass on Sundays, and Catholic clergy were key local administrators. Furthermore the Association soon also took on various trappings that marked it out as politically nationalist in its sympathies. Members of the Irish Republican Brotherhood (IRB) were prominent among the earliest membership. Clubs were named after leading Irish nationalist political figures, and support was openly given to the Irish Parliamentary Party, which was seeking Home Rule for Ireland.¹⁹ At the same time the Association instituted a series of 'bans' that barred from membership those who served the Crown, and those who played rival 'foreign sports and games', such as rugby and soccer.²⁰

Almost from its inception, the GAA was seen by the state as a potentially subversive organisation.²¹ The result was strict surveillance of its activities by the police, and a general rejection of its activities by the Protestant and Unionist minority. Although the state had provided the fertile seedbed from which the GAA might sprout, it seems to have been

¹⁸ For an assessment of changing patterns of leisure in Belfast, see: John Gray, 'Popular entertainment' in: J.C. Beckett et al., *Belfast: the making of the city* (Belfast 1983) 99-110.

¹⁹ W.F. Mandle, 'The IRB and the beginnings of the Gaelic Athletic Association', *Irish historical studies* XX (80)(1977) 418-438; Neal Garnham, 'Accounting for the early success of the Gaelic Athletic Association', *Irish historical studies* XXXIV (133) (2004) 65-78.

²⁰ Paul Rouse, 'The politics of culture and sport in Ireland: a history of the GAA ban on foreign games 1884-1971. Part One: 1884-1921', *International journal of the history of sport* X (3)(1993) 333-360.

²¹ R.F. Foster, *W.B. Yeats: a life*. Vol. I: *the apprentice mage* (Oxford 1997) 71.

less than pleased with the resultant crop. The Association itself reportedly had 836 member clubs by 1909, and was equipped with an attitude that was 'intensely, even obsessively, Irish and anti-British.'²² Thus, state innovations had managed to encourage the growth of a fundamentally anti-state association. The government reacted in a number of ways. By 1889, the GAA was 'thoroughly infiltrated by the police' who not only observed the organisation from without, but also received a great deal of information on it from informers within.²³ Occasionally, the Royal Irish Constabulary (RIC) also acted to prohibit games, which strictly speaking were played in defiance of the 1695 Sunday Observance Act.²⁴ However, it would be quite wrong to see the state as making any real attempt to suppress the GAA at this stage. Rather, the Irish administration chose to ostensibly ignore the growing movement, while keeping a wary eye on its politicised activities. At times of extreme political tension, notably in 1891 when a divorce scandal emerged around the Irish Nationalist leader Charles Stewart Parnell, the files of the police began to bulge with much GAA detail, but the relationship was one of mutual resentment and suspicion rather than conflict.²⁵

With the outbreak of the Great War in 1914, though, a temporary truce was called, and GAA members, along with most Irish nationalists, came forward to help in the Allied war effort. However, the relationship relatively quickly soured, and the subdued hostility that had marked the relationship in earlier years returned. GAA matches were now disrupted by state forces, as they were increasingly seen as focuses for political dissent and offering opportunities for the display of unwelcome separatist ideals.²⁶ When the crunch came, however, and the established British state in Ireland was faced by armed republican opposition from 1919, the actual role of the GAA in the War of Independence was debatable. Its members do not seem to have been unusually active in opposing the state, but the Association did provide a focus for nationalist sentiment.²⁷ However the GAA did play a central role in one key event of the War of Independence, and this solidified

²² W.F. Mandle, *The Gaelic Athletic Association and Irish nationalist politics 1884-1924* (London 1987) 150 and 161.

²³ Mandle, *Gaelic Athletic Association*, 69.

²⁴ See, for example, *Newry Telegraph*, 3 Sep 1888 and *Down recorder*, 3 Jan 1891.

²⁵ W.F. Mandle, 'Parnell and sport', *Studia hibernica* XXVIII (1994) 103-116.

²⁶ Padraig Griffin, *The politics of Irish athletics, 1850-1990* (Ballinamore 1990) 66-68.

²⁷ Peter Hart, 'The geography of revolution in Ireland', *Past and present* CLV (1997) 142-176; 162.

its position in the Irish national consciousness. On Sunday, 21 November, 1920, the Irish Republican Army (IRA) launched a coordinated attack on British government intelligence agents in Dublin. The result was thirteen deaths. In response Crown forces travelled to the Croke Park sports ground in the city where a Gaelic football match was being played under GAA auspices. Firing into the crowd resulted in a further dozen fatalities, including that of one of the players, Michael Hogan. At a time of growing tensions and hostility to the British state in Ireland, these events 'bestowed a martyr's crown on the GAA that it wore with ostentatious pride.'²⁸ The nationalist credentials of the GAA were thus further endorsed by what appeared to be the Association's own blood sacrifice. This perception would prove both an advantage and a hindrance to the development of the Association in the following decades.

In the second half of the nineteenth century, Ireland's sporting culture enjoyed a renaissance. Partly encouraged by the state, sports became an integral part of the lives of many. However, in something of a paradox, the most popular sporting institution that emerged in Ireland had an innate antagonism towards the state. The establishment of two Irish states would then lead to a notable divergence in relationships.

Partition

Partition was both reinforced and challenged by sporting activity. Most Irish sporting organisations, notably the GAA and the IRFU, remained all-Ireland bodies, with the result that their representative teams, where applicable, continued to compete as representing the entire island of Ireland, and the governance of their games continued without reference to the new Irish border. Only association football, a sport already subject to north-south internal stresses, split more or less contemporarily along the border.²⁹ In fact Irish cricket reacted to partition by forming an all-Ireland governing body for the first time in 1921.³⁰ The Irish Hockey Union, formed in 1893, continued to operate on an all-Ireland basis, though its activities were largely confined to the major urban centres, and the sport's

²⁸ Mandle, *Gaelic Athletic Association*, 194.

²⁹ Neal Garnham, *Association football and society in pre-partition Ireland* (Belfast 2004) 160-196.

³⁰ W.P. Hone, *Cricket in Ireland* (Tralee 1954) 120-124.

popularity declined as the British military, which had provided many teams and players, withdrew from the Irish Free State.³¹ The most disruption, however, came in the field of athletics. Here, after an initial show of unity through the formation of the National Athletics and Cycling Association as an all-Ireland governing body in 1922, a split occurred along the border in 1925. Driven more by commercial considerations than religion or politics, the eventual result was that until 1967, many Irish athletes were unable to compete in international competitions, and Irish representation at the Olympic games was limited.³² It was a very different scenario from that in late August 1932, when the newly-elected head of the Irish government and his predecessor had welcomed back Ireland's two gold medal winners from the first Los Angeles Olympics.³³

For most sportsmen, the partition of Ireland and the creation of two Irish states had little impact. A few saw their sporting horizons shortened, but others saw them enhanced. A number of players were able to effectively have double careers by appearing in teams that represented both states, notably on the soccer field.³⁴ Meanwhile, in the two Irish states, the relationships to sport were marked by both continuity and change.

Free State and Republic

In the Irish Free State, the new state closely associated itself with the GAA, giving the Association tax exemptions and allowing it to run a series of state-sponsored Irish Olympiads, by way of the Tailteann games. The state gained immensely from connecting itself with an organisation that was both genuinely popular, and seen as uniquely Irish. The cultural legitimacy of the GAA was used to buttress the political legitimacy of the newly independent but incomplete Ireland. The Tailteann Games in 1924, 1928, and 1932 were used to generate tourist revenues, but also to project an image of stability, competence, and modernism. The events would include not just the 'traditional' athletic events, but also motor racing and pistol shooting. It

³¹ T.S.C. Dagg, *Hockey in Ireland* (Tralee 1944) 51-90.

³² Pádraig Griffin, *The politics of Irish athletics, 1850-1990* (Ballinamore 1990) 73-138.

³³ *Weekly Irish times*, 3 Sep 1932.

³⁴ Sean Connolly ed., *The Oxford companion to Irish history* (Oxford 1998) 517.

seems fair to say that the new state was effective in 'harnessing the potential of sport (...) to help build the nation.'³⁵

The close relationship between Ireland's premier sporting body and the state continued for reasons of utility and personal convenience under the establishment of the revised state of Eire from 1937, and then under the full republican regime established under the constitution of 1947. The GAA continued to be financially advantaged, while politicians accrued a great deal of credit and popularity through GAA involvement. Indeed, many leading Irish politicians first achieved local and national prominence through Gaelic sporting achievement, before going on to political careers. The best early example may be Eoin O'Duffy, the drunken transvestite Irish Fascist leader, and former police commissioner. He first rose to local and then national prominence as a GAA administrator, before becoming a commander in the IRA.³⁶

Jack Lynch won six national hurling and Gaelic football titles between 1941 and 1946, before entering the Dail in 1948 at the age of just 31. It was later alleged that at least three political parties had courted Lynch, despite the fact that he had shown no particular political enthusiasms to this point.³⁷ The importance of GAA involvement in grooming men for political careers became so noticeable that the Association has been described by one historian as 'Fianna Fail at play.'³⁸

Thus, in independent Ireland, the state and the country's leading sporting body had a symbiotic relationship. Each benefited from the close connection they enjoyed. The state and politicians drew credibility, prominence, and popularity from the link, while the Association benefited financially and by way of reinforcing its own prestige. By and large, those sports that did not come under the umbrella of the GAA were ignored by the state. Despite their popularity with some, rugby and association football in particular were shunned, because of their supposed connection to Britain.

³⁵ Mike Cronin, 'Sport and nation building in the Irish Free State 1922-9' in: Neal Garnham and Keith Jeffery ed., *Culture, place and identity* (Cork 2005) 78-97; 94; Marcus de Burca, *The GAA: a history* (2nd edn; Dublin 1999) 138-139; Mike Cronin, 'The Irish Free State and the Aonach Tailteann' in: Alan Bairner ed., *Sport and the Irish: histories, identities, issues* (Dublin 2005) 53-68.

³⁶ Fearghal McGarry, *Eoin O'Duffy: a self-made hero* (Oxford 2005) 19-42.

³⁷ T.R. Dwyer, *Nice fellow: a biography of Jack Lynch* (Cork 2001) 1-29.

³⁸ Dermot Keogh, *Twentieth-century Ireland: nation and state* (Dublin 1994) 34.



Ill. 3: Eoin O'Duffy in the uniform of the Blueshirts, the Irish Fascist organisation he headed. A former politician and police chief, he cut his political and administrative teeth as a GAA organiser. Author's collection.

However, this began to change considerably in the 1980s. In 1988, the Irish national soccer squad qualified for its first ever major competition finals: the European Championships. In 1990, the team travelled to the World Cup Finals in Italy, and in 1994 they qualified again for the tournament in the USA. On the back of this success, it has been argued, Ireland developed a 'forward-looking nationalism', that is, a sense of identity less inhibited and informed by past experiences than formed around progressive ideas and international ambitions.³⁹ International success meant that soccer achieved a prominence and acceptability in independent Ireland that it had never achieved before. This being the case, Irish politicians flocked to the game and its heroes. This was in stark contrast to the situation in 1938, when Douglas Hyde, acting as head of state, had attended a soccer match between the Irish national side and Poland, in Dublin. As a result, he was removed from his role as a patron of the GAA.⁴⁰ Perhaps the

³⁹ Mike Cronin, *Sport and nationalism in Ireland: Gaelic games, soccer and Irish identity since 1884* (Dublin 1999) 135.

⁴⁰ *Irish times*, 19 Dec 1938.

most remarkable statement of the acceptance of the once maligned 'foreign game' of soccer came, when Jack Charlton, the Irish national team's coach from English descent, was awarded honorary Irish citizenship in 1996 for his services to Irish sport.⁴¹

On the back of these triumphs the Irish government, allegedly at the insistence of the premier Bertie Ahern, launched a scheme to build a new stadium to house the national soccer team. The planned Stadium Ireland, nicknamed the 'Bertie Bowl', was finally abandoned in 2002, when economic downturn in the country prompted cutbacks in government spending. Although not a brick had ever been laid, the feasibility studies, public relations programmes and consultants fees had allegedly cost the nation 500 million euro. It was a sporting failure that reflected badly on the state, or at least the government.⁴² The flirtation with soccer had been less than profitable for the Irish state, especially as the fiasco over stadium construction coincided with a downturn in the fortunes of the national side. However, the GAA remained a refuge for those seeking legitimacy. It was perhaps no coincidence that within months, Bertie Ahern was back at Croke Park watching sports, making speeches, and seeking once more to reflect the perceived glories of the GAA.⁴³

The state in independent Ireland has had a remarkably close relationship with sport and sportsmen. For the most part, this has been more beneficial to the state and the politicians than it has been to the sports. By allying themselves with popular and credible organisations and individuals, politicians have secured for themselves a certain measure of regard and esteem. Sport has served to buttress the political careers of individuals in independent Ireland, but also perhaps even the existence of the state itself.

Northern Ireland

In truth, the history of sport in Northern Ireland before the outbreak of 'The Troubles' in the late 1960s remains to be written. However, it does seem that the community there experienced sporting division on several

⁴¹ *Sunday mirror*, 8 Dec 1996. The prospect of granting Charlton honorary citizenship was first raised in the Irish Senate in 1990.

⁴² [*London*] *Independent*, 12 Sep 2002; *Guardian*, 15 Sep 2002.

⁴³ *Scotland on Sunday*, 15 Dec 2002.

levels. Some sports, such as association football, continued to see teams exist that were at least perceived as being representative of religious or political interests. Thus, the Linfield club of Belfast emerged as the standard bearers of Protestantism and Unionism, while Belfast Celtic, as its name might suggest, was cast as the Catholic and Nationalist side.⁴⁴ But class too played a role, with sports such as rugby football and tennis retaining a very middle-class support, while the association game and, for example, greyhound racing, were largely working-class concerns. The GAA continued to be regarded as a subversive organisation. The Unionist regime at Stormont largely shunned the Association, but occasionally used relevant legislation to prevent what they saw as potentially seditious meetings.⁴⁵ At the same time, lack of finance prevented the northern state playing any great part in promoting athletic sports for its citizens. More than one call by a Stormont MP for more sports facilities for his constituents was met with the simple response that funding was unavailable.⁴⁶ The one major area in which there was briefly an exception to this ambivalence to sports was regarding motor sport. The Stormont government actively promoted motorcycle and motor car racing for a number of reasons. On one level, it was seen as promoting Northern Ireland as a progressive and modern state. On the other, it was clearly seen that major motor sport events were a boon to the tourist industry. The government acted by passing legislation in 1922 that allowed public roads to be closed for race events, and by offering small prizes for competitors. It also invited representatives of motor racing across to Northern Ireland to see the available facilities.⁴⁷ Enthusiasm here was much curtailed from 1927, however, when a series of accidents resulted in a number of fatalities and serious injuries amongst spectators, and a dispute emerged about who should take responsibility for the paying of

⁴⁴ For the last encounter between these clubs, which ended in a riot and a series of assaults on players, see: Pádraig Coyle, *Paradise lost and found: the story of Belfast Celtic* (Edinburgh 1999) 89-106 and Malcolm Brodie, *Linfield: 100 years* (Belfast 1985) 75-80.

⁴⁵ Eanna Mulloy, *Dynasties of coercion: emergency legislation* (Londonderry 1986) 7-9.

⁴⁶ See, for example, *Northern Ireland Commons debates*, XXX, col 553-556, 14 May 1946.

⁴⁷ G.S. Davison, *The story of the Ulster* (Birmingham 1949) 9-11; Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast, CAB/4/92, Northern Ireland government cabinet conclusion, 19 Oct 1923.

compensation. By 1940, it was thought in government that 'the usefulness of a Tourist Trophy Race has long since passed.'⁴⁸



Ill. 4: A car competing in the Ards TT motor race in Northern Ireland c1930. The governments in both Irish jurisdictions used motor racing as a means of encouraging tourism and portraying positive and modernist images of their states. Author's collection.

After the Second World War, the Unionist government was eager to re-establish the country's tourism industry, and the promotion of sporting attractions was seen as a key area. In particular golf and angling had drawn visitors in the 1930s, and it was hoped this trade could be resurrected. However, the state was frustrated in its endeavours by the refusal of the privately-run golf clubs to allow large numbers of non-members to use their facilities, and the fact that many of the country's best salmon rivers had been polluted or damaged by wartime activity. In the end, the government did little but publish some short guides that painted a positive if overly optimistic picture of Ulster.⁴⁹

⁴⁸ Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast, CAB/4/406, 417, 417/10 and 432, Northern Ireland government cabinet conclusions, 13 Sep 1938, 15 May 1939 (with memo), and 31 Jan 1940.

⁴⁹ Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, Belfast, COM/7/27 and 7/29, Minutes of the Tourist Development Committee, Planning Advisory Board, 27 Sep 1944; Tourist Development Committee, Planning Advisory Board correspondence

Thus, the state in Northern Ireland under the Stormont regime had little role in the field of sport. Hampered by a very limited income, and also by very limited ideas, the government failed to use sport effectively to any economic or social end. In a country where a sizable minority saw the state as an illegitimate entity, it would perhaps have been hard to use sport to create or bolster any kind of national identity or solidarity, as occurred further south. This was made even harder by the fact that there were already major pre-existing fissures in Northern Ireland's sporting culture. Just as the population was divided by religion and politics, so it was decided in its sporting activities. Even where the rival communities indulged in the same games, as in the case of soccer, competition promoted division and not integration.

However, if the history of sports in Northern Ireland under the Stormont regime remains to be written, the development of sports since then has become a focus for myriad historians, sociologists, and psychologists. The two key ways in which the state interacted with sport in Northern Ireland during the period of direct rule from Westminster (1972-1999) were through the creation of sport and leisure facilities, and by the establishment of the Sports Council for Northern Ireland. Starting with the opening of Maysfield Leisure Centre, in 1977, the London government, acting through local government structures, oversaw and funded the creation of a vast network of sports and leisure facilities, giving Northern Ireland a far higher level of provision than any another part of the United Kingdom. The aims seem to have been to draw young men away from street politics and civil disorder, and to allow them to expend their time and energies in a more controlled manner.⁵⁰ Reeking of the good intentions of the 'rational recreation' movement of a century before, the venture seems to have been equally unsuccessful. In practice, individual facilities came to be dominated by either Protestants or Catholics, depending upon their location, and served to harden rather than break down community divisions. These facilities became not 'benign sites of sporting practice but

file, Samuel Rice, Honorary Secretary, Ulster Angling Federation to J.G. Calvert, Stormont, 26 June 1945. For publications see, for example, *Angling in Ulster waters* (Belfast 1950).

⁵⁰ Alan Bairner and Peter Shirlow, 'When leisure turns to fear: fear, mobility and ethno-sectarianism in Belfast', *Leisure studies*, XXII (3)(2003) 203-207.

(...) part and parcel of the act of territorial building.⁵¹ The Sports Council, meanwhile, seems to have been established with something of a similar brief. Created in 1973, its mission was primarily to promote popular participation in sports for health reasons, but underlying this was also the hope that such activity would lead to a softening of community hostility by creating interactions on the sports fields. It would do this by supplying state funding to help establish local facilities and to aid the development of sports clubs and associations.⁵² Again, however, there were problems. The GAA continued until 2001 to include in its constitution rules that barred members of the 'Crown forces' from membership and competition in the sports of hurling and Gaelic football. This meant the Association and its affiliated clubs were classified by the state as having 'restricted membership' and they therefore only qualified for limited funding. As a result the GAA, an organisation almost exclusively supported by Catholics, and retaining its perceived affiliation with Nationalist and Republican politics, could cry discrimination and claim they were, once again, the victims of the British state.⁵³

With the establishment of devolved government in Northern Ireland, the relationship between the state and sport has continued to be a difficult one. Under both of the administrations that have emerged the Culture, Arts and Leisure portfolio, which includes the sport brief, has been allocated to Unionist politicians. The first incumbent was Michael McGimpsey of the Ulster Unionist Party. One of his earliest actions was to initiate a task force to produce a soccer strategy for Northern Ireland. It reported in 2001, making over 150 recommendations. These included one that a new national stadium should be built. The choice of site and the nature of the development has become a bone of contention between the government and some football supporters, as well as the differing political groups in Northern Ireland. The probable location is the site of the former Maze prison, south of Belfast. This was the facility in which ten Republican

⁵¹ Peter Shirlow, 'Sport, leisure and territory in Belfast' in: Alan Bairner ed., *Sport and the Irish: histories, identities, issues* (Dublin 2005) 230-237.

⁵² John Sugden and Alan Bairner, *Sport, sectarianism and society in a divided Ireland* (Leicester 1993) 20-23.

⁵³ John Sugden and Scott Harvie, *Sport and community relations in Northern Ireland* (Coleraine 1995) 12-13. The term 'Crown forces' covered all members of the British Armed Forces, but also those serving in the Royal Ulster Constabulary, the police force in Northern Ireland.

hunger strikers died in the 1980s. Politicians have more trouble with the wider connotations of the development, which may include a centre for the study of conflict resolution and possibly a preserved area of the prison. Many football supporters object as the area is too distant from Belfast, and has very limited transport links, while some Unionists fear the development will become a Republican shrine.⁵⁴ The controversy still rumbles on, and the stadium remains unbuilt.

Under the second administration, the Department was headed by Edwin Poots, a member of the Democratic Unionist Party, a group with close links not only to traditional Unionist political values, but also to the evangelical Free Presbyterian Church. Despite this, Poots attended a GAA match in the predominantly Nationalist city of Newry in January 2008. The reaction was not universally positive. Some Unionists saw this as 'embracing everything Irish and gaelic', and possibly a precursor to a Papal visit. Meanwhile some Republicans claimed this was part of continuing attempts to 'normalise British rule in Ireland.' Poots himself further muddled the waters by suggesting that the GAA drop the practice of playing the Irish national anthem before games.⁵⁵ In June 2008 Poots was replaced by fellow party member Gregory Campbell, who had previously dismissed the GAA as a 'quasi-political organisation' rather than a sporting one.⁵⁶ Reconciliation on the sports field, and off it, still has some way to go in Northern Ireland.

Conclusions

The relationship between the state and sports in Ireland since the mid-eighteenth century has displayed many fundamental shifts, but also some surprising continuities. Perhaps the greatest continuity is simply the fact that the state has continually considered sporting activity worthy of its attention. Whether opposing or encouraging it, the state has produced legislation and deployed its influence in ways that have contributed to the changed sporting patterns of the country.

⁵⁴ Brian Graham and Sara McDowell, 'Meaning in the Maze: the heritage of Long Kesh', *Cultural geographies* XIV (3)(2007) 343-368.

⁵⁵ Letters to the editors of *Belfast newsletter*, 6 Feb and *Irish examiner*, 19 Feb 2008. *Belfast telegraph*, 19 Jan 2008.

⁵⁶ *Derry journal*, 4 Aug 2006.

From opposition to popular pastimes, for political and moral reasons, the state came to be a promoter of sports and games by the later nineteenth century. At this point, however, developments in Irish sport, notably its overt politicisation, caused something of an estrangement between government and sportsmen. The rise of the GAA saw the British state in Ireland come to regard sports once more with suspicion. However, the emergence of the GAA as an organisation that had impeccable nationalist credentials and that was truly popular, saw it secure a very special place within independent Ireland. The state gave the organisation a unique position in the country, but one that was largely supported by the majority of the population. Despite occasional spats, the reciprocal relationship has proved durable and profitable to the GAA and politicians alike.

In Northern Ireland, the antipathy of the state to Gaelic games continued, though in truth the Stormont government, impeded by financial restraints and its own limited ambitions, was never particularly well disposed to any sporting venture. With the imposition of Direct Rule from Westminster, in 1972, attitudes changed. For the first time, the British state in Ireland became a proactive promoter of sport. However, this was as much for political as cultural or health reasons. An activity that had once worried the state because of its supposed ability to mask or encourage unwelcome political activity, was now looked to to provide a safety valve that would draw the frustrated away from political activity. There is no evidence to suggest this policy was ever successful.